

1-1-1953

# GRAZING IN THE UNITED STATES

Marion Clawson  
*Iowa State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/amesforester>

Part of the [Forest Sciences Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Clawson, Marion (1953) "GRAZING IN THE UNITED STATES," *Ames Forester*: Vol. 40 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/amesforester/vol40/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ames Forester by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [digirep@iastate.edu](mailto:digirep@iastate.edu).

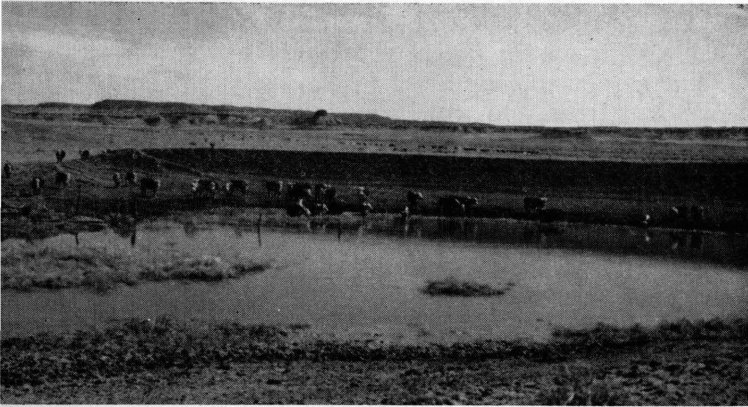
# GRAZING IN THE UNITED STATES

By

MARION CLAWSON

*Director of the Bureau of Land Management*

*[Photos by U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management]*



**G**RAZING of domesticated animals on native forage plants is probably one of the oldest activities of civilized man. Since long before the dawn of history domesticated animals have been grazed under more or less close herding on plants that grew naturally without man's care. The nomadic tribes as well as the settled peoples throughout history have kept livestock, most of which received their feed from native plants.

In the United States grazing of domestic livestock was an economic necessity with the early settlers. As those along the Atlantic seaboard obtained livestock, animals were grazed on the meadows and in the woods. There was a fringe of livestock grazing all along the frontier which bordered the settled communities. In our Colonial years, as in still earlier periods in Europe, livestock often found difficulty in obtaining food during the winter months. Livestock losses were heavy and production per animal relatively low. The native American Indians, who were as fond of beef as of venison, were additional hazards.

Throughout that period of American history when settlement was expanding, first through the great central part of the nation and later into the west, there was an extensive livestock grazing industry along the frontier. Animals were grazed upon native plants. They were slaughtered usually just for their hides and tallow. Poor transportation and lack of refrigeration made it often impossible to use the meat except for extremely limited local consumption. This type of grazing industry was transitory. With rapid conver-

sion of grazing lands and forests to farms there was no thought given to conservation. This historical experience undoubtedly left its mark in terms of common attitudes toward proper use of grazing resources.

After the war between the States grazing as a major industry suddenly and rapidly expanded. Grazing was and remains the permanent land use in most of the west. Although a considerable part of the Great Plains has been plowed for crop production, by far the greater part of the western half of the United States is and probably will continue to be used principally for grazing. In at least two major respects grazing in this area differed from that in the earlier transitional grazing development farther east. In the first place, these permanent grazing lands are arid and semi-arid in character rather than humid as is the middle West and East. In the second place, roughly half of these grazing lands are in federal ownership with some additional amounts in state ownership. A strikingly different land tenure problem thus exists.

## The Changing Picture

Use of the federally owned grazing lands has undergone marked changes over the decades as these lands have been brought under different forms of administration. At first the public lands were used for grazing without control or supervision. Use was essentially on a first-come, first-served basis. Beginning in 1891 national forests were established and by 1910 the area in national forests was approximately as large as it is today. By and large, the national forests included higher mountain areas, many of which were covered with commercial timber but large areas of which had few trees.

A substantial part of the national forests is usable for grazing, particularly for the summer season. The Forest Service regulates the grazing of privately owned domestic animals. The numbers of animals allowed upon a given area and the season of use are specified by the Forest Service. In order to qualify for grazing on national forests, a rancher must own some private land which can produce feed and forage to supplement the forage available seasonally from the national forests. The ability of privately owned land to do this is known generally in the west as commen-

surability. The degree to which privately owned land is dependent upon the federal land for a balanced year-round operation is known as dependency. The degree to which the public lands were used prior to the establishment of the federal land reserve is known as priority. Commensurability, dependability and priority are terms with which every range user grazing upon national forests is familiar.

The Forest Service has established limits on livestock numbers. There is a general maximum limit above which no operator will be allowed to graze except under special conditions. There is also generally a protective limit below which no commensurate dependent operator will be reduced as long as there are other operators still above this limit.

The Forest Service has found it necessary in its administration of the national forests greatly to reduce livestock numbers and total amounts of grazing. Numbers were allowed to increase from 1910 to 1918 under pressure of demand for increased food during the war period. Since 1918 numbers grazed have been reduced by one-half and in addition, the average grazing season has been shortened so that total months of grazing on national forests today is not over one-third as high as it was in 1918. The Forest Service was in a difficult position. When it made adjustments in grazing on the national forests, this threw a correspondingly heavier load on the already over-burdened public domain. But on the other hand, if it made no reductions the national forests would have been overgrazed and probably damaged.

Throughout its history and more particularly the last two decades the Forest Service has given particular emphasis to the multiple uses of the national forests. The same areas can often be used for timber production, for wildlife, for grazing, for recreation, and as watersheds. Some of the major problems of administration of the public lands arise out of reconciling potential conflicts between these various uses.

Until 1934 federally owned lands outside of national forests, generally known as the public domain, were open for grazing on an uncontrolled and unregulated basis. In 1934 the Taylor Grazing Act was passed, providing for constructive administration of the remaining grazing lands on a conservation basis. In addition, it provided for the first time a comprehensive authority

for the classification of public lands, and for their disposal to private ownership only if suitable for the uses sought. The objective of the act was to stabilize the use of land, to put it on a sustained yield conservation basis and to stabilize the livestock industry which used this land. The Taylor Act definitely was not a law providing for the redistribution of the use of the federally owned grazing lands. The fact that the Homestead and other acts had been in operation for several decades and that under them citizens could obtain federal land on relatively generous terms, but that a great deal of this land still remained in federal ownership, was rightly taken as evidence that most of the remaining land was unsuited to private ownership. Practically all of the federal grazing land valuable for grazing use was in actual use in 1934. The Taylor grazing act wisely recognized these facts and attempted to provide only for the sound administration and management of these lands rather than for any influx of new users.

### **Taylor Grazing Act Meets Needs**

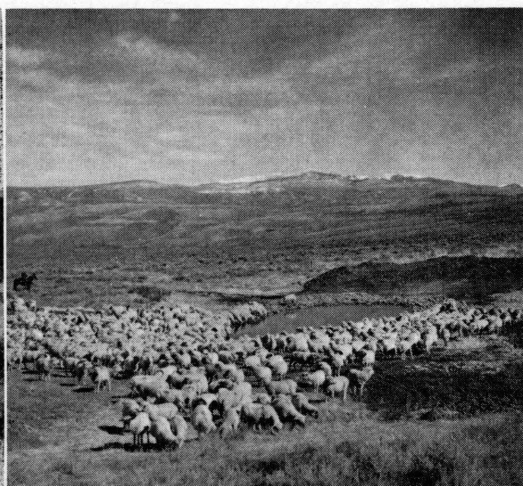
In general, the same administrative problems were encountered and the same management measures taken on the grazing districts as on the national forests. Numbers of livestock allowed to graze and season of use were regulated and controlled to prevent over-use of the grazing resource and to provide for sustained yield production of grass and other forage. However, adjustments in livestock numbers and seasons of use on the grazing districts could not be made at the expense of any other federal lands since there was nowhere else for the displaced livestock to go. The adjustments had to be and were absorbed by the livestock operators in their year-round operations. The act, by putting emphasis upon land ownership and stable livestock operations, largely eliminated the so-called "tramp sheep operator." The severe droughts of 1934 and 1936, coming on top of the series of relatively dry years in which the range had been fully or over-used, resulted in reductions in the livestock numbers without the necessity of administrative action.

On the public lands within grazing districts livestock water was developed in many areas previously lacking in it so as to make available for conservative use previously unused forage. In relatively recent

**BEFORE . . .**



**WHY . . .**



**AFTER . . .**





years substantial acreages of range have been reseeded and their productivity increased in this way. As a result of the combination of these various factors numbers of livestock grazed within grazing districts have not had to be reduced so drastically nor is it contemplated that on most ranges they will have to be reduced drastically in the future. It is expected that the extensive and long continued reductions in permitted grazing that have been experienced on the national forests will not have to be repeated on the grazing districts.

The range livestock industry in the United States today uses land which in general has no other economic use than grazing. Although production of forage per acre is relatively low, such lands have been organized into ranches in such a way that production per man is perhaps the highest of any major type of farm in the United States. Our expanding population and our increasing real income per capita has greatly increased our demand for meat, particularly beef, and this in turn has brought new values and new methods of production and utilization to the range lands.

### **Range Land an Integral Part**

In the range livestock industry the federal lands play an important part. In the United States there are perhaps 68,000 ranches producing livestock which could be principally supplied by grazing. Of these perhaps 66% utilize the federal land to some extent. There are roughly 23,000 users in the national forests, 20,000 users in the grazing districts, and 18,000 users of other types of federal land. Some of these ranchers use more than one type of federal land but in total there are probably as many as 45,000 users of federal land. Roughly 65% of the total range livestock is grazed at some season of the year on public lands of one kind or another. These livestock obtain 27% of their total feed from such lands. The importance of the federal lands is far greater than these figures might indicate since in general the federal lands are used only at certain seasons and the numbers grazed at that season may set a limit to the number which the rancher can graze or feed on his own land during the other seasons. The federally owned and the privately owned lands of different physical types are synchronized into a year-round livestock operation.

The federal land within grazing districts has been materially improved in terms of reseeding, water development, fencing, and direct erosion control structures. However, a vastly larger program of this sort is needed and is physically and economically sound. It has been estimated that 22 million acres could be revegetated by reseeding or other measures, that waterspreading could be practiced on 2½ million acres, that 68,000 miles of fencing is desirable, and that 40,000 erosion control structures are needed. At the best a program of this magnitude would require perhaps 20 years for its completion. Such a program could mean an increase of 30% in the productivity of

the federal land within grazing districts. Generally similar but somewhat smaller improvement possibilities exist on the national forests.

In the last decade or so ranchers have become very much interested in the improvement and development of their privately owned range lands. Water development, in order to make use of range, has been carried on for many years, particularly in the southwest. However, such programs have been accelerated in recent years and in addition reseeding, waterspreading, fencing and other range improvement and development programs have been carried out in a major way on privately owned range lands. A part of this program has been assisted financially by the federal government through the medium of the agricultural conservation program.

Most striking of all has been the changed attitude toward grazing land and the increased knowledge about it which has come to pervade the livestock industry and the federal agencies concerned with it. The average rancher today knows far more about the sound management of grazing lands than did the average rancher 20 years ago. The physical possibilities of increased forage production through good range management are more generally realized than ever before. Sound administration of grazing land and sustained yield production at the highest level is more common to private landowners and federal range land administrators than has ever previously been the case.



### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .**

Director Clawson graduated from the University of Nevada in 1926 with a degree of Bachelor of Science in agriculture. In 1929 he earned his Master's degree from the same institution. In 1943 he was conferred the degree of Ph.D. in economics from Harvard University.

Mr. Clawson entered public service in 1926 as a staff member at the State Agricultural Experiment Station at the University of Nevada. In 1929 he joined the U.S.D.A. as an economist in Washington, D.C. In 1940 he was designated to head that Department's studies in the Columbia Basin irrigation project, and in 1942 was given a similar position for the Central Valleys studies in California. It was in 1948 that Mr. Clawson was appointed Director of the Bureau of Land Management, Department of the Interior.

Mr. Clawson is the author of more than 50 scientific articles and reviews on economic subjects. He has also written several books, the best known are: "Western Range Livestock Industry" and "Uncle Sam's Acres."